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UNCLAS BRATISLAVA 000740

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BUDAPEST for USAID MONIQUE NOWICKI

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SUBJECT: GOS ROMA STRATEGY: SOCIAL TERRAIN WORKERS

REFTEL: BRATISLAVA 215

This is the first in a series of cables on current GOS activities to address Roma issues.

1. Summary. Six months have passed since the February looting in eastern Slovakia, as Roma protested changes to the welfare system. The response of the Roma community shocked Bratislava, and the GOS immediately initiated steps to soften the impact of reforms (reftel). The GOS continues to improve its on-going programs and outreach efforts to the 620 Roma settlements, most recently with renewed commitments to the pivotal Roma Terrain Worker program. Terrain workers provide various kinds of assistance to Roma living in settlements, from helping fill out paperwork to relaying the importance of education and preventative healthcare. At a recent national roundtable on the future of this program, the government discussed steps to assume greater custodianship for its continuation. End Summary.

What is a Social Terrain Worker?

2. Currently, Slovakia has approximately 90 social terrain workers, trained and funded under various pilot programs managed by NGOs and the Roma Plenipotentiary's Office. Social terrain workers, modeled on a successful Czech program, are assigned to a number of Roma settlements throughout eastern Slovakia. The terrain workers, many of whom are themselves Roma, help socially-disadvantaged Roma resolve problems and promote greater communication with town officials. During the February looting (reftel), no community where terrain workers operated reported any disturbances. The pilot project is ending, and now there is an urgent need for the government to commit to the continuation of this successful project by taking on more administrative responsibilities.

MOL Commitments

3. Partners for Democratic Change (PDCS), the implementation partner for USAID's Roma Integration Program, recently organized a national roundtable to discuss the future of this program. The Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (MOL) committed to providing the salaries for 53 social terrain workers in 33 communities; 12 are still in the approval process, and another 9 to 10 will be approved in conjunction with a new health center program. The MOL is currently signing contracts with the respective local governments, which will receive subsidies to employ the social workers. The MOL is not providing funding for social terrain coordinators previously managed by the Plenipotentiary's office, and it remains unclear which agency or ministry will be responsible for their overall management and training. Klara Orgovanova, the Roma Plenipotentiary, recently told press that there is a need for as many as 400 social terrain workers in Slovakia's Roma communities.

Writing the Job Description

4. The different stakeholders -- the terrain workers, NGOs, and government officials -- also discussed administrative concerns, such as the terrain worker's official job description and the necessary educational requirements for employment. Although supportive of the project, the Director of Family Policy Peter Guran (MOL) stated that terrain social work should include other socially disadvantaged groups, for example the physically handicapped or the elderly, which would require a higher level of specialization. Both Orgovanova and Jana Kviecinska, the Director of the Government Office for Human Rights, opposed the requirement of a university degree on the basis that no current terrain worker meets this criterion. Furthermore, it would be extremely difficult to attract such specialists to work in Roma settlements.

Comment

15. The Roma Terrain Worker project is one of the most important and successful GOS programs currently operating in Slovakia. While conveying government policy to Roma communities, the workers also inform the GOS about the concerns of the Roma. This will help to avoid future upheavals, which could further divide Roma and majority communities as happened last February in the East. The dialogue at the national roundtable showed government

commitment to creating mechanisms for more effectively resolving the problems in settlements, but it is still at the beginning stages. The MOL must still reach a consensus on lingering bureaucratic issues, but annual salaries for the workers have been provided and the profession of "social terrain worker" was officially entered in the listing of occupations in Slovakia.

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